

## Trichy Thayumanavar

Mannarkoil J. Balaji

Concertgoers during the 1930s and 1960s would have encountered “full-bench” Carnatic music concerts, which included violin, mridangam, ghatam, khanjira and konnakol artists on stage apart from the vocalist. Concerts went on for about four to five hours and the *tani avartanam* alone was played for about 45 minutes. Konnakol is the art of vocalising rhythmic syllables, and konnakol wizards like Mannargudi Pakkiri Pillai, Mannargudi Vaidyalingam Pillai, Vellore Gopalachariar, Mannargudi Arumugam Pillai, Tiruvarur Nagarajan and Dharmapuram Abhiramasundaram Pillai ruled the rhythm world with their inimitable konnakol styles and had a huge following. Not to mention vidwans T.K. Murthy and T.H. Subhashchandran of our times who have been teaching konnakol (apart from other percussion instruments) to students.

Among konnakol giants, Trichy R. Thayumanavar is a living legend who has carved a niche for himself in the realm of Carnatic rhythm. He is 86 and has done yeoman service by enriching the art with his expertise in mridangam, khanjira and konnakol. He keeps himself fit by practising yoga, swimming and floating in the water in order to improve his focus and concentration. You must listen to his konnakol renditions to realise his artistry, especially the expressions in his recitation of “*ta dhi ta ka jo nu tam*” with accents on *dhi* and *jo* which make you aware of the aesthetics of the lilt in rhythmic expressions. He has made several improvisations and has adapted various teaching techniques to popularise the concept of konnakol in concerts and also in percussion ensembles.

He holds “A-top” ranking in both mridangam and konnakol with an “A grade” in khanjira in All India Radio. He received the title of Vadya Padmam a few years ago from the Brahma Gana Sabha, Chennai. This season, Kartik Fine Arts honoured Trichy Thayumanavar with the Dr. Seerkazhi Govindarajan Memorial Award.

Born in 1931 in the small village of Kottaiyur near Kumbakonam, this octogenarian visited Chennai last year on a special request from the Palani Sri M. Subramania Pillai Trust, to speak about the masters of the Pudukottai tradition. Speaking at length about the ‘guru parampara’ and the Pudukottai lineage of percussion artists, he elaborated on their contribution to the field of Carnatic rhythm by demonstrating various types of moras, korvais, cadences and their rhythmic ideas. He used konnakol to highlight all these points during his 140-minute long lecture demonstration. Towards the end he also sang a few famous Tiruppugazhs including the 21-akshara *Kadi modi vaadadu nool katriduvorum*. He demonstrated this Tiruppugazh in various talas besides rendering trikala.

The audience which included vidwans like Tiruvarur Bakthavatchalam, Karaikudi V.M. Ganesan and Neyveli R. Santhanagopalan, enjoyed the presentation. Mridanga vidwans Ganesan and Bakthavatchalam felicitated him.



Even after delivering the elaborate lecture-demonstration, Thayumanavar seemed to be brimming with energy and stamina. When I requested him for an exclusive interview for *Sruti* magazine, he immediately obliged and spoke enthusiastically about his lineage, life, and artistic experiences. Excerpts from the interview.

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### Trichy Thayumanavar in conversation with Mannarkoil J. Balaji

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#### Who were your gurus?

I learnt initially from Kumbakonam Narayanaswamy Iyer and his brother Kumbakonam Rajappa Iyer. Once Dakshinamurthy Achari visited Kumbakonam Rajappa Iyer and requested for one of his promising students to be sent to him for grooming. I was thus selected and sent to Dakshinamurthy Achari for advanced lessons under the gurukula system for about 12 years.

### What is the parampara of Dakshinamurthy Achari?

My guru Dakshinamurthy Achari learnt percussion from Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai, a disciple of Pudukottai Manpoondia Pillai—pioneer of the Pudukottai school of percussion who also made the khanjira a concert-worthy instrument.

### Did you find any difference between the fingering techniques of the two different percussion schools?

Yes. Kumbakonam Rajappa Iyer was a disciple of Azhaganambia Pillai and Sakkottai Rangu Iyengar, who were pioneers of the Tanjore tradition of mridangam playing. Dakshinamurthy Achari was a pioneer of the Pudukottai tradition. There were no major differences in the basic lessons but there were some in the fingering techniques and also in the approach to accompaniment for kriti. I learnt that playing for the kriti is different from playing the kriti itself. The Pudukottai school while judiciously mixing the two, predominantly used the former and also developed various techniques of solkattu-based development during kriti accompaniment, which neither hindered the flow of the kriti nor the manodharma of the performer.

### Did the laya vyavahara of both schools influence your playing?

The origins of Tanjore percussion can be traced to Bharatanatyam and Harikatha and hence the emphasis was more on melodic patterns like thekas, short arudis, muktayis and teermanams. The origins of Pudukottai percussion being tavil, the emphasis was more on arithmetical brilliance with a special acumen towards accompaniment to kriti. The proponents of the latter school developed inimitable patterns for tisram, khandam and misram which are still in vogue. Since I had exposure to both schools, I tried to take the best of both and made suitable adaptations according to the demands of the situation.

### You had a distinguished konnakol career.

I played the mridangam for several concerts of Madurai Somu, in which Vaidyalingam Pillai recited konnakol and my guru Dakshinamurthy Achari accompanied on the khanjira. I took a special interest in this art and learnt the nuances from Vaidyalingam Pillai and also from my guru who used to recite konnakol while I practised on the mridangam. It was he who corrected my accompaniment

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style and taught me the proper way to enter into the flow of the kriti, popularly described in Tamil as “*paattukku amutthuvadu*”.

Mridanga vidwan Tanjore Upendran greatly encouraged me to pursue konnakol as a serious art and I scrupulously followed his advice with rigorous practice and hard work.

According to C.S. Sankarasiva Bhagavata (guru of T.N. Seshagopalan and brother of mridanga vidwan C.S. Murugabhoopathy), Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai used to recite konnakol beautifully in concerts and during informal sessions. I have also heard that Pudukottai Manpoondia Pillai and Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai used to gather pebbles and arrange and re-arrange them in different ways to form various rhythmic patterns and combinations when all these sophisticated mathematical and scientific techniques were unheard of.

#### **What techniques have you developed in konnakol rendition?**

I have closely followed in the footsteps of Pakkiri Pillai and Mannargudi Vaidyalingam Pillai in konnakol renditions. Apart from merely learning and reciting, I have introduced a few innovations in rendering “*ta ri ki ta ta ka*” as “*Hari kita ta ka*” to emphasise the word “Hari” to recite the name of the Lord. Also, in order to produce the primordial sound *OM*, I have modified the ending syllable *tom* to sound as *OM*. Apart from these, I have retained the pristine purity of the masters of yesteryear which has enabled me to be a link between the past and the present.

#### **Do you teach konnakol to your students?**

I run a school called Gurupriya Laya Vidyalaya Trust in Tiruchi where I teach this art to hundreds of students along with mridangam, ghatam, khanjira and morsing.

#### **Have your disciples become performing artists?**

Yes, there are many who have taken music as a full-time profession. Among them are K.R. Kumar, Trichy S. Rangarajan, Amirtarajanallur M. Muruganandam, Salem K. Srinivasan, Trichy Murali (ghatam vidwan in Chennai), V. Manikandan, Valangaiman Thiyagarajan, and Salem S.T. Murthy.

Alathur Srinivasa Iyer, Dr. S. Ramanathan and other vidwans have sung for the arangetram of my students.

#### **You built a temple in Pudukottai...**

At the command of my guru M.V. Dakshinamurthy Achari, I built a temple for Dakshinamurthy Pillai, who was called Sri La Sri Chinmayananda Mouna Guru Swamigal. His temple is adjacent to Sri La Sri Murugananda Swamigal Mutt named for Manpoondia Pillai in Pudukottai on the Trigokarnam Main Road. Every month I visit the temple without fail and perform pooja, and also conduct the annual Guru Pooja Aradhana in January, coinciding with the annual Guru Pooja of Manpoondia Pillai, organised by the Palani Sri M. Subramania Pillai Trust.

#### **What is your contribution to the documentation of the Dakshinamurthy Pillai legacy?**

Several years ago I published a book entitled *Life History of Mridangam and Khanjira Mahavidwan Pudukottai Srimaan Dakshinamurthy Pillai*. I collected and published many letters preserved by Tiruvengadathayya of Madurai (Pillai’s prime disciple) about Dakshinamurthy Pillai. I documented many of his moras and korvais including the ‘shatkala tadiginathom’. I also included an exercise given by Pillai for laya nirnaya. The book was released by Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer and Kripananda Variar, and the first copy was received by my guru Kumbakonam M. Rajappa Iyer. The proceeds from the sale of the book are donated to poor students for their education and social upliftment.

#### **A word about your career as Staff Artist in All India Radio?**

I joined All India Radio as staff artist in 1972 and served for 19 years. During my tenure in AIR I conducted many novel programmes like Laya Kolam and Vadya Vrinda. I have presented several konnakol based programmes in AIR in Laya Kolam which was a special percussion solo programme wherein I introduced 10 minutes of mridangam performance and five minutes of konnakol.

#### **To what would you attribute your success?**

Guru bhakti. The passion for music keeps me going, and reminiscing about the great percussion masters of the past makes me feel humble and seek more and more laya gnana.

#### **What is your advice to budding artists and young percussionists?**

Be patient, work hard and do not try to change or stray away from traditional values for the sake of cheap popularity, name and fame. *OM, Guruve tunai.*

**(Mannarkoil J. Balaji is a mridanga vidwan)**